The Skanky Soul Of Jimmy Twist

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- Bruce Bethke

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It was late in the spring of 1977 when I returned, not by choice, to London. I'd been on the bum about the continent for some two years, busking for change and just generally enjoying life. The busking went well; I'm a good guitarist, a fair singer, and blessed with the sort of thin, blond, boyish good looks that appeal to the wallets of tourist women.

Unfortunately, the "enjoying life" bit climaxed in a brief but intense affair with Katrina, the pudgy daughter of a Hamburg banker. When she and I parted company that May there were no regrets, no accusations, no hard feelings and no words about the skin-headed young thug she was engaged to marry before she met me. I do wish she'd mentioned him.

For as it happens, he followed me to Amsterdam, bashed me silly, smashed my guitar, tossed the pieces in the Oude Schans Kanaal, tossed me in after it, and landed the both of us in the Jordaan clink. His family's solicitor arrived the next morning, of course, and took him back to Hamburg less a 50-guilder fine for dumping rubbish in the canal but I went before the dock for vagrancy. By noon they'd seized my passport and put me on the train to Vlissingen, thence to spend another cheery night in jail before catching the morning boat back to Mother England.

I really do wish she'd mentioned him.

Not that I felt bad for being deported; the Dutch don't have proper beds in their jails, just concrete slabs with a thin pretense of mattress. I didn't mind leaving.

Trouble was, I was going back to England with no money, no prospects, no choices, and above all, no guitar. I'd been quite attached to that guitar; it was a lovely old 1953 Gibson LGO that'd belonged to my Uncle Lewis, and now the dear thing was a clutter of kindling floating somewhere in the Zuider Zee.

Still, as Rasham was to later tell me through Jimmy Twist: The cold rain it must fall to bring the bountifulness forth.

The dark pain you must feel to love the gladful tidings more.

I will admit that if he'd tried to tell me that just then, though, I would have broken his nose.

The next day was spent in wallowing across the Channel from Vlissingen to Sheerness. In the morning I parked myself in a cold metal chaise lounge on the foredeck and claimed I was making plans, but mostly I stared. Stared at the oily grey sky. Stared at the

somewhat darker oily grey sea. Stared at the gull droppings and rust streaks on the deck. Then I opened my kit bag and stared awhile at the neck and peghead of my guitar: the only pieces I'd managed to rescue during the preceding two days' lunacy. The poor thing would never play again, but I resolved that if I ever lucked into a mansion, I'd mount the neck above the mantelpiece.

It was while my eyes were drifting back toward another good stare at the sky that I realised I was being stared at. Sitting balanced on the starboard rail, with nothing behind him but five hundred miles of open sea and then Norway, was a Jamaican, dredlocks whipping in the breeze. The start that came with realising we were looking directly into each other's eyes nearly tipped my chair.

It wasn't as though I'd never seen a rastaman before I'd partied with quite a few of them; they always had the best ganja but this man seemed a focus of intensity. His eyes were black volcanic glass set in ivory, binding mine. Standard English deference demands you quickly look away from a stranger, but I could not. Perhaps I'd been among the sun-starved Northern Europeans too long, but he seemed darker than black.

Then he smiled? His lips parted, his cheeks grew taut, he bared his teeth: I certainly hoped it was a smile. In any event, I flashed my best Stan Laurel in response, and he threw his head back and laughed hoarsely, the thin sound streaming away in the breeze. I used the opportunity to glance away; when I looked back, he was gone. At first I thought he'd pitched over the rail, but as I looked 'round for someone to report it to I saw him sauntering aft, singing softly in the same hoarse voice. With great relief, I went back to soaking my feet in a pool of self-pity.

We ran into a bit of weather in the afternoon, and I moved to a vacant chair in the ship's salon, where I remained unable to decide what I would do after the ferry docked. Get my passport reinstated and return to the continent? Appealing, but impossible. Until I repaid the fine and the fare, I was stranded in the U.K.

Stay on in Sheerness, then, or Gillingham? In Gillingham?

Seriously…

Hitch to Birmingham and drop in on Mum and Dad? Well, yes, I could, but either Dad would beat me for losing his brother's guitar, or Mum would tell me again how I was headed to a bad end just like that ne'er-do-well Lewis.

Still, I was stuck for a better idea and had just resigned myself to crawling meekly back to Birmingham, when one really nasty thought popped up and queered the deal. Mum had always treated the guitar as if it were the first cousin to heroin. Suppose she welcomed me with open arms, for finally being rid of it?

That left London. London is the sump of the Isles; if you can't make it anywhere else, you go to London, tell people you're a musician, and live on the dole. Even in London, though, I knew I was in for a tough hang of it. Nearly 25, I still wore patched Levi's and long hair, and my taste in music ran to American Rhythm & Blues, which at that moment was out of vogue again. (British music fans have no rivals for fickleness, excepting perhaps this Italian heiress I met on Mallorca.)

But I had some borderline mates I could look up on Fonthill Road, and with a bit of research…

By the time the ferry docked I had a rough sketch of my future. Clearing Customs with the usual annoyance, I converted my last few guilders to pounds and pence, nicked a copy of Time Out from a news-stand, and hung my thumb out on the motorway. Two days later I resurfaced in London; along the way I'd traded my least ratty Levi's for some camouflage commando knickers, borrowed a scissors and done a nasty job on my hair, and changed my name to Stig Bollock.

London, in the summer of 1977, was a marvelous place to be impoverished, unemployed, and living on the cheap. I stayed for a bit with some lads I'd met in Milano, and they introduced me to Gina, who took me in for two weeks and gave me urethritis, but Public Health cleared that right up.

Gina in turn put me on to a bunch of squatters in Finsbury Park, and from there I went to a Mrs. O'Grady's rooming house, which was not as cheap as squatting but a bit safer from a materialistic standpoint. By the end of June I'd a rathole flat, a Fender Squire with no serial number and a dubious past, a matching amplifier, and a bit of a reputation as a guitar player. The crowd I'd fallen in with was exciting, and my prospects for getting into steady gigging were quite good; on the whole it was a keen turnabout, given that six weeks before I'd been bobbing in a sewage-laden canal and wondering if anyone would bother to fish me out. Everything was falling together wonderfully 'til I met Mr. Twist.

Jimmy Twist moved in on the morning of the first of July. I remember because Old Duckbury and I were sitting out on the front stoop that morning, having a particularly bad chat. Duckbury was a retired career soldier, one of those grim relics of empire that should be declared part of the National Historic Trust and only allowed out on holidays. Tall, cadaverously thin, yet with a thick bristling white moustache and hair to match, he claimed to have served in the Boer War, served in Burma, served in Normandy he carried himself with such magnificent Prussian arrogance I kept expecting him to claim he'd served at Waterloo.

Anyway, Old Duckbury and I had taken to sitting out on the front

stoop in the mornings before the heat built up, chatting a bit and sharing a Guiness or two. The conversations were hard to follow, as he had a habit of slipping from war to war, but it was his Guiness, so I did my best to look attentive. The morning that Twist moved in, Duckbury was telling a particularly tedious story about some tart he'd met in Paris, and I was nodding politely and thinking of getting out my Fender to try a bit of busking old habits die hard when suddenly the most clapped-out Cortina I've ever seen came bouncing up to the kerb and a half-dozen blacks leapt out.

"'Od's Balls!" Duckbury yelled. "It's the Zulu Nation!"

"Now, now," Mrs. O'Grady chimed in from behind us as she opened the front door, "you keep a civil tongue in your head, Mr. Duckbury." She hurried down the steps, quick as her fat little legs would carry her, and spoke to the blacks. "'Tis the door at the top of the stairs. I've unlocked it, and you may go right up." Most of the men grabbed cartons out of the boot of the Cortina and started in.

"Mrs. O'Grady!" Duckbury roared, "I've put up with Pakis and Chineese and Lord knows what else you've seen fit to bring in, but if you think I'll live in a house full of nig-nogs"

I had to admire her; she tapped her slippered foot, pursed her lips, and shot Duckbury a glare that would've peeled paint, but when the words came out they were soft and sweet. "This is our new boarder, Mr. Twist. He'll be taking the attic flat. You'll be nice to him, won't you, Mr. Duckbury?"

As she spoke, the driver of the car stepped 'round to the kerb, and I saw with some surprise that he was the Jamaican I'd encountered on the ferry.

"I'm giving notice! I swear it!" Duckbury stood, grabbed the half-finished Guiness out of my hand, and stormed into the house.

"Pay him no mind," she said to Twist. "Ducky's loud but harmless." Then she turned to me. "Mr. Twist, I'd like to introduce you to another of our tenants. Mister " she paused, wrestling with it a moment. "Stig," she said at last. She never could bring herself to calling me "Mr. Bollock."

"H'lo," I said, "I believe we've met." All this got me was a blank look, so I elaborated. "The ferry to Sheerness?" After another blank look, I shrugged, said, "Sorry, must be mistaken," and tried another subject. "If it's any consolation, Duckbury gives notice every time anyone moves in.

You should have heard the fuss when I first came 'round!" I laughed and felt profoundly stupid, for I was laughing alone.

After an excruciating moment of silence, Twist said, "Ah, I see. He thinks you and I be alike." He laughed politely and then turned to Mrs. O'Grady.

"Excuse me." He flashed me a quick, condescending smile as he started up the stairs.

And that is how Mr. Twist came to live over my head. He was an odd sort of neighbour; that is, I had some degree of rapport with every other tenant in Mrs. O'Grady's house. Even the bank clerk on the first floor knew me, to the extent that he lifted his nose and looked disgusted whenever we passed in the hall. But the one time I met Twist on the stairs he was just sitting there, chanting softly in some strange language and seeming not to see me. If the smell hanging like a cloud about him was ganja, it was the most potent pot I'd ever caught a noseful of: I got dizzy just walking by.

That meeting on the stairs turned out to be quite unique in another way as well, for as the hot weeks wore on, Twist came down from the attic less and less often, until at last he never came out at all. Instead, small groups of strange black men popped by to see him at odd hours and stayed in his flat, conversing in low, dark voices. Occasionally I caught bits of words piercing through with sudden clarity rasta, jah, burning, death but nothing that ever made real sense.

In time, I began to notice the music as well: a primal, throbbing, savage sort of music I more felt than heard through the ceiling. A pulsing, driving rhythm that stirred strange passions within me; God, I wished I could play like that! Between that funky beat and my blond good looks I could make a fortune!

Duckbury, however, grew restive as July melted into August. "He's not to be trusted," I once heard him shouting at Mrs. O'Grady. "I fought against the Mau Mau. I know their primitive ways!"

"Oh, shut up!" she'd yelled back. "If the music bothers you so, turn your telly up!"

Another time, when I joined Duckbury on the front stoop for a cold German lager (he may've been excrutiatingly British, but even he wasn't fool enough to drink warm beer in August), he said, "You know, Stig, I wonder whether we were wise to open the empire. It's a small island, after all, scarcely room enough for we Englishmen."

I smiled it'd taken a month for Duckbury to include me in "we Englishmen" then said, "I take it you're still upset about our Jamaican neighbour."

"I don't believe Twist is Jamaican, not for a minute. He looks Haitian to me," he said, worrying his mustache.

"So?" I asked.

"SO?!" he thundered back at me. "Where do you think voodoo comes from, you twit? That man has opened a voodoo temple a hounfour right over our heads! Every night they're doing their darkie rituals; I can hear the music!"

"I rather like the music," I said softly.

"Do you? That's the whole problem! They seduce you young people with their jungle music, drive our young English girls sex crazy with their animal beat, and " I set the beer down and stood to leave. The strong aftertaste of bigotry was proving quite unpalatable. "You mark my words!"

Duckbury's voice followed me. "Those nig-nogs only want to slit your throat and dance on the ruins of white civilization!"

I went up to my room, got out my Fender, and thrashed through a few chords. Truth to tell, I was starting to feel a bit obsessed with Twist's music. It seemed so driving, so hypnotic, so much better than the head-banging punk rock I was playing. With a twinge of nerves, I suddenly realised I was feeling drawn no, compelled up the stairs to Twist's apartment.

I fought it off, and thrashed my Fender some more.

A few nights later my band did a club gig, a freebie but a gig nonetheless, and so about three A.M. I found myself lying in my bed, in the bloody hot August night, quite unable to sleep. Tossing, turning, exhausted from playing but still wired up; listening to the music filtering down from the attic again; it seemed louder this time, more insistent, as if it were calling me, teasing me, tugging at my soul strings I sat up straight in bed. I had to know.

I leapt out of bed, raced up the dark stairs (the bulb had burned out some weeks before), and began pounding on the door. To my surprise it was not latched, but swung right open. The room was lit by a single, flickering candle in the middle of the floor, and a group of black men sat in a circle about it, their gleaming eyes turned toward the doorway as if expecting me.

"I, uh…." I said. Their hostility was a palpable thing in the air, tugging at the hair on the nape of my neck. Twist's eyes, his intense eyes, bored into me like hot skewers. "I really dig the music you're playing," I said quickly.

"Close the door. Sit yourself down," Twist commanded as the men moved aside to make room for me in the circle.

I did as I was told, and when I was sitting, I tried again. "Y'see, I'm a musician, Mr. Twist "

"Do not call me by that name," he said. "That is only the name of the shape I now work through. My spirit-name is Rasham Rasta Jah Afrika."

Spirit-name? Uh oh, I'd walked in on a l-o-o-n-e-y!

"So, Mister Stig," he continued, "you like the music of the people of Jah?" I nodded cautiously. "You wish you could play music like that?" I nodded again. He leaned forward, closer to the candle, his face a goatlike, bearded shadow-mask of ebony and red, and his voice

sank to a hiss. "To make music like that you would have to be black. You want to lose your skin, it going to cost you, mon."

"Oh, hell," I said, as my little white testicles crawled up and hid.

I spent the rest of that night listening to Rasham and his friends talk in an island dialect I understood only slightly, and in the morning he started me running the first of many odd little errands: out to Knightsbridge to find a Jaguar Mark IX and steal its hubcaps, down to Hammersmith to pawn said hubcaps and buy food, over to Islington to feed a toothless old madwoman living in a dustbin. That night he sent me out to one of my favorite clubs, not to drink or dance or pick up birds but merely to watch and listen.

As voodoo rituals go, this one seemed pretty tame.

The next morning Twist came down to pound on my door at six A.M. and make sure I caught my morning chat with Duckbury. When I calmed down enough to speak without obscenities, I said, "Let me get this straight. You want me to keep talking to the old bigot?"

Twist snapped his fingers a few times to set a rhythm and sang:

You must not feed the fire of intolerance if you would fight discrimination.

Judge not the evil of another man for you are not the Tribulation.

That made as much sense as any of Duckbury's war stories, so I smiled, nodded politely, considered getting out my guitar to try some busking…

This kept up for weeks. Between errands I became a regular at the meetings in the attic, and I kept waiting for someone to elaborate on the cost bit.

It never happened. So in the mornings I'd head downstairs to share beer and dire talk with Duckbury, who seemed to think some sort of battle for my soul was shaping up, and try as I might I could not disabuse him.

It was dull, up in that attic, listening, listening, listening, and hoping to learn; sometimes from Rasham, who spoke in rhymed couplets and sang as often as he spoke; sometimes from Jimmy Twist, who was a swell chap at parties and on the whole a lot more fun to be around. In time I did learn to tell who he was at any given moment, and in time I learned enough of the island patois to join the conversations.

Much of what I said amused Twist and caused him to light up another spliff; much of what I said annoyed Rasham, and as August trickled away, he grew increasingly impatient with me.

But truth to tell, I was getting impatient with Rasham, too. I'd spent weeks with him, listening to his endless prattle on life, death, and the immortal soul, and I'd yet to learn a single musical riff! One night he sent me, alone, to walk the streets of Brixton 'til dawn, just to

prove that I had no need for fear. Okay, so I learned Brixton wasn't nearly as nasty a place as I'd thought, but that taught me less than nil about music.

The closest we came to music was the night he asked me to bring my guitar up to his room, only to touch it, snort derisively, and say, "This be metal, mostly, and plastic. The livingness be buried too deep. You must get another instrument."

Righty-o, no problem, I'll just write a cheque. Shall I get gold-plated tuning pegs while I'm at it? He did not appreciate the sarcasm.

When the last week of August hove into view, though, Rasham seemed to have a change of heart. "The covenant between man and the music of Jah," he said one day, "be not lightly entered into. Mister Stig, you be not yet ready." He sighed. "You may never be ready." He arched his back, looked at the cobwebbed ceiling, and scratched his head. For the first time, I noticed a sense of weariness in the way he moved, like an old horse in his last summer.

"But I can wait no longer; my time be growing very short," Rasham continued, at last. "Mister Stig, I have one last errand for you." And this time, the instructions he gave me made sense.

Until he insisted on sending Jimmy Twist with me, though, I didn't realise how serious this was to him. Taking my Fender along, we spent the entire day prowling through the guitar shops of Charing Cross Road, trying to find an instrument he approved of. I saw a few shiny new Strats I really liked and a metal-flake pink Hagstrom with pushbuttons that appealed to my sense of humor, but those he dismissed with a contemptuous snort. I looked at a variety of Gibsons as if I could afford them and in one shop actually found the box of an L20 archtop some ass of a heavy-metal rocker had sawn the neck off, trying to build a custom guitar which I showed Twist as I explained about the neck of Uncle Lewis's guitar.

I swear to God there were tears in his eyes when he laid fingers on the L20 and answered in Rasham's voice. "It be a good dream," he said, "but only the living can be healed. The dead cannot be risen by such as I." We moved on.

Toward dusk, I was getting fed up. "Let's hang it up," I suggested. "Maybe we'll have better luck on the morrow."

"No," Twist said, "it must be tonight. Rasham's time be growing very short." I argued, but in the end we tried one last pawnshop.

I was up front, trying to tune an old Harptone with a neck like a longbow, when I heard the most marvelous popping and jiving sounds come dancing out of the back of the shop. The proprietor and I walked over to find Twist standing behind a dusty old Kay upright bass, running his hands over it as a man would caress his lover. "Stig," he said, "this be it."

"Jimmy," I said, "I don't like to play bass. Front men are always guitarists."

He turned his eyes upon me and repeated, "This be it." He would brook no argument from me, but instead turned to the pawnbroker and started haggling over price.

Half an hour later, I walked out of there a bass player.

Twist insisted on taking the bass up to his room that night. I was quite tired from the day's shopping and so turned in early, but about midnight I was awakened by one of his friends pounding on my door. "Rasham say to come up," was his message. I hitched up my pants and followed him up the steps.

Rasham evidently had been preparing for this for some time. The flat was crowded with black men and women, a few of whom I'd come to know; the air was heavy with the smell of roasted chicken and prime ganja. What struck me as most odd was how quiet the people were; this night the music, the powerful and insistent music, was curiously absent.

My string bass lay in the middle of the floor, inside a circle of candles.

Rasham was kneeling, caressing its peghead, and cooing softly in island dialect. Looking up at me, he said, "Friends, it be time." Immediately, what little murmur of conversation there'd been died away. One by one, the people came to kneel in a great circle; one by one, the candles were snuffed out until at last there was but one candle burning in the center of the circle.

Rasham stood up and raised the bass to playing position.

"Friends," he began, "tonight I and I be calling together the people of Jah for to witness the sealing of the covenant. Mister Stig, come forward!" Hesitantly, I stepped up to the edge of the circle. He looked sternly at my pants and said, "You going to lose all your skin? Or just above the waist?" I must have looked quite puzzled because he shouted, "Take off your pants, mon!"

I wanted to laugh and walk out right then, but I looked at all those somber black faces and couldn't. Instead I slowly, hesitantly, and with a great deal of blushing, undid my fly and dropped my trousers. A few of the women giggled involuntarily at my lily-white bum, then hushed.

"That be better," Rasham said. "Now, take your instrument." He held forth the neck of the bass. I stepped forward awkwardly, for to take it as he wanted me to meant I had to stand with the one lit candle between my feet, and there was heat enough to notice on my more tender parts. But take it I did, and I stood there, nervous and uncomfortable, while he bowed his head and mumbled something.

"Rasham?" I interrupted him with a whisper, "is this, y'know, like

magic?"

Rasham considered it a moment. "Yes," he said.

"Is this" I screwed my courage up "is this black magic?"

He smiled a wide, toothy grin. "Yes!"

"I'm not I mean, it's not like I really believe I have one, but I'm not selling my soul or anything, am I?"

Rasham's eyes bugged out, and then he burst into an incredible fit of Jimmy Twist laughter. In seconds, everyone in the room was convulsed with laughter. "Your soul?" Rasham gasped at last, wiping tears from his eyes.

"Why should I want such a sick, crippled thing? White boy, I do not try to take your soul. I be giving you one!"

"But you said it was black magic!" I argued, more from embarrassment than disappointment.

"Foolish mon!" he laughed, shaking his head. "You think with the color of your skin! You think white be good, black be evil!

"But to the people of Jah, we think: the sick man's face be pale. The dead man's face be pasty and white. The face of the oppressor and the oppressed! be white. Have you learned nothing from Duckbury?"

They talk about ideas crystallising. At that moment I finally understood the expression, for I felt a nebulous idea suddenly become a vivid truth.

Duckbury was not evil. His sin was that he had served both the wicked and the righteous without question. Centuries of heritage and tradition weighed upon him, obscuring his sense of right and wrong, and every time he'd fought for justice he'd also fought for racism, for condescension, for the "white man's burden"…

And in the end, the masters he served had sucked him dry and cast away the bitter husk of an old man. That was why he sat on the front stoop, refighting his wars of oppression: he was desperately trying to convince himself that he was not oppressed.

"The fertile earth be black," Rasham continued. "The healthy, the beautiful, the free be black." He paused and composed his face into a stern mask. "So, are you ready for to lose your skin? Or will you keep thinking with it?"

Old Duckbury had let the cultural rubbish of his skin muffle the voice of his soul. As had I. "I'm ready," I said without hesitation.

Oh, that my gift were words and I could describe that night! The ritual was beautiful, and joyous, and I wish I could pop over to Canterbury and say, "Look here, lads, I've found something you've lost," but I wouldn't know what to tell them next. That my ears still ring with song and laughter, and a music so glorious it caught me up and carried me away?

That Rasham, with a touch, made me part of the music, and it

was so moving and true it fulfilled everything I'd ever dared to hope or dream?

Would they just smile condescendingly if I told them that the bass and I had melted, flowed together, become as lovers and then closer? We synergised; my fingers flew across the strings without effort, and every note I played was in time, in tune, and simply right. There were no longer any barriers between my heart and the music of my instrument, just as there were no barriers between my soul and the hand that played me. I too had become an instrument, playing in the great dance that moves earth and sky. Rasham had shown me the groove.

Praise Bountiful Jah, I had found the groove!

When next I was aware, a sweet bright dawn was breaking over London and I was in my room, still naked, but relaxed, confident, and blazing away on my bass. Somewhere in the old, sad parts of my heart, the crippled thing that was Stig Bollock awoke, listened to my playing, and was stunned by what he heard.

No, I had not suddenly and magically become a great musician. I was playing with the same measure of skill and talent I'd had the day before.

But now I played without some things: without fear, without confusion, without Stig's cynical appraisal of the music's market value. Moreover, I was playing with one very new and wonderful thing: the simple knowledge, deep at the core of my being, that I had been blessed. I had always been blessed. Blessing is funny, that way; it's not a reward at all. It's a challenge. At birth I'd been given the gift of music, and the Lord had waited all this time to see what I would make of it. Rasham was exaggerating when he'd said he was giving me a soul. Rather, he had awakened the one I'd always had, and freed it from a centuries-old tradition of self-repression.

I had shed my guilty skin.

When the sun was fairly up, I pulled on my trousers and went down to see Duckbury. It was the elation of the moment, I suppose; I had this queer idea I could heal him with a touch, if only I could see him while the night was still fresh in my mind.

In bathrobe and slippers, he answered the door. Though his hair and moustache were neatly brushed, his face was even more pinched and sour than usual, as I'd caught him with his teeth out. "Duckbury!" I shouted, grabbing him by the sleeves. "Stop punishing yourself! You are forgiven!"

For a moment he stared at me as if I were quite mad, then an odd mixture of sternness and pity flooded into his face. "I see," he said quietly.

"They've won." He gently prized my hands off his sleeves and

began easing me back into the hall. "What did they do?" he continued, still quietly.

"Convince you that black is white? Show you the Devil and tell you he's God? I've seen a lot of good men fall to that one. It's an old darky trick."

"No, you've got it wrong!" I protested.

"I'm sorry," he said with surgical compassion, "but you need more help than I can give now." Flashing a tight, clipped smile, he slammed the door. Stig Bollock surfaced for a moment to suggest, with a snarl, that Duckbury'd missed a great career in mortgage banking.

Then my new inner calm took over. Duckbury could wait; there would be a time to help him later. All that was meant to happen would happen in Jah's own good time. I decided to pop upstairs and have a chat with Twist about my future.

His door was locked.

I watched for a week, but there was no sign of comings or goings. Within a few days, I was uncomfortable; within the same few days, there was also no mistaking the growing smell of decay emanating from Twist's room, or the odd, moist, spot on my ceiling. By week's end, it had grown into a large patch of slippery ooze that spread down my walls, peeling the wallpaper and blackening the paint. Stig Bollock surfaced again, more strongly, to batter and rail against his confines and tell me what an enormously gullible idiot my true soul was a calm and beatific idiot, perhaps, but an idiot nonetheless.

I began to feel worried.

Sunday morning, on Mrs. O'Grady's insistence, Duckbury, I, and the bank clerk broke down the door. The first breath of corruption that wafted out of the room drove us back (drove the clerk all the way back to his room, in fact, where he booted his breakfast all over the carpet), but Duckbury and I held kerchiefs over our noses and, fighting our gag reflexes, forced ourselves back into the room again.

Twist had skipped out, owing two months' rent and leaving several bags of rubbish in the kitchen. The week-old chicken leftovers were exceptionally vile. We traced the moisture to a leaky gasket on the loo.

Shortly after Twist moved on, another black man stopped by to drop off a package Rasham had meant to leave me. Unwrapping it, I found a final message from Rasham and a remarkable collection of records: Toots and the Maytals, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Jimmy Cliff… Suddenly, I realised what I'd been listening to all along.

I had to change my name and hair again, of course. Stig was too well known for his callow cynicism; his old mates would not have believed his change of heart was genuine. That winter, I formed a new band. Within a year, between the reggae beat and my blond good

looks, I did make a fortune. A sizable fortune.

I own an estate in Coventry now, with a massive marble fireplace, over which hangs the neck of a certain much-beloved Gibson guitar. I spend a fair amount of time there, what with all the publicity bashes, record company parties, and whatnot. I do have an image to maintain, after all.

Or rather, I have Duckbury to maintain it. He makes a marvelous, if overpaid, majordomo. Under his command the gardener has done wonders with the roses. Of course, Duckbury still thinks I'm quite mad, and now and again he tries to talk me into behaving the way a proper lord of the manor is expected to behave.

There will be a time to heal Duckbury. Perhaps next summer, when his beloved roses bloom again…

Mrs. O'Grady couldn't refuse my solicitor's offer to buy her boarding house for twice its appraised value. She's moved back to County Sligo and is spending her sunset years with her family, telling them marvelous stories of the odd folk in London. Buying her out felt so good I decided to buy a few more boardinghouses in Finsbury Park, and a whole string of row houses in Brixton. That's where I live, when I'm not on tour or obliged to be at the estate. The squatters who fill my houses think I'm just another chap trying to cultivate a vague resemblance to a famous rock star, even when I show up with a lorry full of groceries and feed the neighbourhood.

I tell them I robbed a store. It's easier to explain, and it's in accord with Rasham's final instructions. He's placed a lien against me that I will be paying off the rest of my days, in the coin of Jah: Always keep a warm bed and a full plate for the hungry stranger who comes in His name. I spend a lot of time about the row houses, making sure that everyone who knocks is welcome, for we all come in His name, whether we know it yet or not.

Perhaps my motives are less than pure. I also spend a lot of time among the squatters in hopes that Jimmy Twist will again show up or that I will again find Rasham in some stranger's eyes. For you see, part of being a famous musician is meeting the thousands of kids who wish they were you.

Most stars consider them a nuisance. Myself? I want to introduce them all to Rasham.

Afterword To head off the questions everyone asks after reading this story: no, I've never lived in a squat in London. No, I've never been arrested for vagrancy in Amsterdam. Yes, but the penicillin cleared it right up. And as for that fourth question: just like the president, I never inhaled.

All the gritty, realistic details of this story were researched by my good friend, Thomas R. Smith. A disciple of Robert Bly, Smith is a

superb poet in his own right, and his many collections and anthologies are well worth tracking down.

Tom once met Philip K. Dick in Metz, France, and gave him the translation of the Sufi poet Kafir that is quoted in Dick's The Golden Man. He also once served as the unwilling target of an unwarranted and gratuitous personal insult from Harlan Ellison, which cracked up an entire room at a WorldCon. He coached me through writing the first draft of "Cyberpunk" in

1980, and now, with "Jimmy Twist," Tom has made his fourth contribution to the world of SF.

Pretty good work for a poet.

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